



## **Serving up children's health - Opportunities and barriers in the school food system to prioritise nutritious food for our young people**

To: England

For info: Contacts from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### **Key Issue**

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## **1. Introduction**

Guy's and St Thomas' Charity have commissioned research in 2019 to gather information regarding how School Food Standards are being implemented in practice. The resulting report has now been published.

The research forms part of broader work that the Charity is involved with and aims to tackle the inequalities related to childhood obesity. This briefing provides an overview of the findings of the research. A full copy of the report can be accessed via the link below:-

[Serving up children's health](#)

## **2. Background**

Guys and St Thomas's commissioned Cookwise, (a specialist food consultancy) in 2019 to review school food in one London borough. The area encapsulated many of the challenges children face growing up in inner cities across the UK.

Reviewers visited a total of 60 primary and secondary schools, including some in academy chains, taking detailed observations and notes about the food on offer throughout the day, the food consumed, the wider school food environment and catering operations.

The report advises that the reviewers spoke to the headteacher and / or senior leadership team at each school, as well as their catering staff, who were either employed in-house by the school or by an outsourced catering company. It is commented that it was generally harder to gain access to secondary schools and as such these schools represent a smaller proportion of the sample. This may be indicative of more significant challenges to improving food provision in secondary settings.

The research methodology was designed to examine areas most likely to impact on healthy weight, including the existence and effectiveness of food and drink policies in schools; portion sizes and nutritional balance of plates; training of kitchen and school staff; the presentation and range of healthier and unhealthy break time food in secondary schools; whether puddings were optional and if they were served after the main course in primary schools; and provision and accessibility of water fountains. Areas such as food education and school gardens were not a focus for this review as, although important for children's wider learning and development, there is not strong evidence that these activities alone have an impact on childhood obesity.

### **3. School Food Policies.**

The report highlights that it is important for each school to have a well-considered food policy, guided by the School Food Plan and School Food Standards. The research found that although the awareness of the government's School Food Standards was generally high many schools were unaware that it applied to all food served throughout the day.

It is advised that the reviewers found that more than half of primary schools (57%) did not have a school food policy, while a further 12% had a policy but did not actually comply with it, leaving just 31% of primaries having a policy that was followed to at least some degree.

In secondary schools, the report states that policies were found to be more widespread with 80% of those reviewed having a school food policy. However, it was also found that documents were rarely implemented or even known about by catering staff, so do not translate to a healthier food offer.

The research also outlined that a total of 73% of schools visited had School Food Standards-compliant lunch menus but this did not translate into children actually eating healthy, standards-compliant meals.

### **4. Providers**

The fragmented system of provision was acknowledged in the report and it was outlined that the provision was provided by a mixture of in-house kitchen teams and external catering companies of various sizes.

The report states that out of the schools visited by reviewers, 30% had food provided by in-house cooks, employed directly by the school. The remaining 70% were catered for by one of the many external for-profit providers. The picture that emerges is of a highly fragmented school catering market with multiple providers and variable quality in terms of the food that ends up on children's plates. It is reported that the research has shown that the in-house teams or external caterers have the potential to ensure children eat nutritious food, as long as this is made a priority by the headteacher, caterer and kitchen team.

The report also highlights that proper monitoring of school food was crucial, to ensure that nutrition is a catering provider's first concern rather than the food served up being just an exercise

in procurement, cost control, or efficiency. With the need for healthy food to be prioritised by school senior leadership, rather than seen as an issue of risk mitigation.

In addition, it was commented that employees cooking and serving in the school kitchen was critical to the quality of the food served and the research found that the level that the staff were valued and managed by catering companies and school leaders could determine the extent to which they deliver nutritious tasty meals.

The report commented that reviewers encountered a mixed picture which included examples of kitchens where a high number of kitchen staff had minimal training and relied heavily on pre-prepared frozen food that was high in fat and salt. On the other hand some staff took great pride in their work, sourcing local ingredients and serving excellent food, including both in-house and outside caterers going the extra mile to provide great food and service.

The report states that reviewers found no clear correlation between size or type of catering provider and the quality of food, with the same contractor able to deliver excellent food in one school and poor food in another.

The issue of school meal funding was also highlighted as having an impact on the catering staff, and the fact the funding has not risen in line with inflation, leading to examples of kitchen staff being paid less than the Living Wage.

## **5. School Meal Times**

The report looked at the various aspects of meals throughout the day and the reviewers looked at what food was available and how it was served for the following:-

- Breakfasts
- Break time at secondary schools
- Hydration in schools
- Lunchtimes, Inc. primary school lunches, and secondary school lunches
- After school

### **5.1 Breakfasts**

The research found that schools were often unaware that breakfasts must be School Food Standards compliant. The breakfast clubs were typically paid for out of the schools already squeezed budget and were usually run by teaching assistants who were unlikely to have specific training around balanced breakfasts. In many of the schools visited by reviewers, the food offered at breakfast included sugary cereals, jam, white bagels and white bread, as well as squash or milkshakes. In a few schools, reviewers saw chocolate-based cereals and croissants.

### **5.2 Break time at secondary schools**

The report stated that for the majority of secondary schools reviewed, the break time offering was carbohydrate-heavy with baked goods such as pizza, burgers, toasted sandwiches, sausage rolls, chicken nuggets or wings, cookies and pastries. For 60% of the secondaries reviewed, the food on offer at break times failed to meet School Food Standards. Even at those schools where healthier options were available, these options sat alongside a raft of non-School Food Standards-compliant items.

### 5.3 Hydration in schools

The report comments that reviewers found that many of the schools visited were doing a good job of making tap water readily available both in the dining room and in other locations across the school, and using posters or other means to promote the importance of good hydration. However, it was also stated that 29% of primary schools offered squash at breakfast clubs, which was also non-compliant.

Many of the secondary schools reviewed were selling a large quantity of bottled water, despite tap water being freely available. Some secondary schools visited had made a clear effort to sell a range of School Food Standards compliant, lower-sugar soft drinks, rather than unhealthier varieties. Most had banned energy drinks outright.

### 5.4 Lunchtime

#### Nutritional quality

The research highlighted that while 73% of school lunch menus reviewed were theoretically School Food Standards-compliant, reviewers found that this contrasted starkly with the food children were actually eating. It was commented that this seemed to be because healthy, compliant options often sat alongside cheap, oven-ready or frozen items that were generally far less healthy, and required little investment in staff resources.

#### Primary school lunches

- **Vegetables** - Reviewers frequently saw children choose a healthier curry or tagine option only to be given a tiny amount of the main meal and therefore sit down to a plate of plain white rice. However, it was also reported that some schools had introduced rules around vegetables in an attempt to encourage consumption.
- **Portion sizes** – The report stated that 19% of the plates seen were unbalanced either because the overall meal was either too large or too small. Staff were often reported to have received portion size training, but it was not clear what form this took, or that it was having an effect.
- **Puddings** – It was commented that most primary schools required children to have their main meal before pudding and that a significant number serve fruit and yoghurt-only desserts for the majority of the week. This was despite teachers in various schools being entrenched in their views of the necessity of a traditional (high calorie/ sugary) dessert. However, evidence points to children being happy without these - so long as the fruit or yoghurt provided is attractive and fresh, rather than the sad-looking bowl of neglected, bruised or overripe fruit seen in some schools.
- **Food waste** – the report outlined that in a fifth of schools, children were throwing away nearly half of their meal, in the majority it was 10-30% of the meal. Vegetables consistently were the main item thrown away.

#### The primary school dining room

The review of the dining room found that the number of staff in attendance was proportional to the level of chaos in the dining room.

It was commented that in the primary schools where teachers ate alongside pupils, a calmer, more congenial atmosphere was created, especially where the school had round tables and / or family-

style serving. Many primaries reviewed knew this to be the case and choose to pay for a number of teachers to eat in the dining room each day. However, the report noted that most primary schools they visited would like to pay for staff to eat alongside pupils, but some felt they could not afford to.

## **Secondary school lunches**

The report states that reviewers found that the main hot food options were mostly cooked well and were flavoursome, and takeaway options were often healthy. It was reported that vegetable and salad consumption was lower in secondary schools than in primary schools. The young people mostly selected not to have vegetables on their plates and when they were served automatically, around 80% ended up in the bin. Salads were mostly ignored by pupils - only 20 of 650 pupils at one school took any - and catering staff said they felt it would be difficult to keep salad bars tidy, hygienic and well-stocked during busy lunch hours.

At most schools, fruit was available as an option for dessert alongside traditional puddings. Plenty of children opted to only eat a dessert at lunchtime. The report stated that it was clear how difficult it was for young people to compose balanced plates, particularly at secondary school, when so many tasty, convenient, less healthy options were being made available to them.

## **Packed lunches**

The report advised that the reviewers were not surprised to see that the majority of packed lunches were very unhealthy, full of items high in sugar, fat and salt and reported that it was common to find a white bread sandwich accompanied by several highly processed items, marketed especially for lunch boxes, such as crisps, cheese straws and dips, yoghurts, biscuits, cakes, sweets and sugary drinks. However, many schools reviewed were aware that packed lunches were often unhealthy and were taking measures to promote healthier options.

## **5.5 After school**

- **After school clubs at primary schools** - At primary schools, reviewers found that food offered at after school clubs was often prepared in-house by teachers or a teaching assistant and less frequently by an external caterer or sports club provider. It was sometimes the case that food met the School Food Standards, but this was often by chance.
- **Beyond the secondary school gates** - Once the school day was done, students in inner city areas were exposed to a huge range of unhealthy fast food nearby. All secondary schools reviewed expressed concern about the popularity and proximity of chicken shops and other fast-food outlets.

## **6. What next**

The report makes a series of recommendations that highlight where Guys and St Thomas's believe that energy should be prioritised. It was hoped that the recommendations would form the basis of ongoing action among those invested in improving children's health and educational outcomes. In turn, they also want the report to inspire a reinvigorated approach to school food across the school day in both primary and secondary schools, with children's health at its heart. The recommendations set out in the report are as follows:-

### **Procurement and regulation**

- Department for Education to adapt the school food procurement guidance so that contracts explicitly weight value towards nutritional quality of food as well as cost
- This guidance should cover food quality, finance, contract types, employee training and remuneration (including real living wage for all school catering staff), and support schools (particularly Headteachers and Governors) to source the best possible food provision

### **New funding mechanisms and eligibility**

- Long-term we are calling for universal free breakfasts and lunches in both primary and secondary schools
- Transparent, clear and simple funding mechanisms would underpin successful delivery of national school food policies and ensure that nutritious food is being provided at school throughout the day
- Shorter term, we support the National Food Strategy recommendations to extend eligibility of Free School Meals for those children particularly at risk of health inequalities, including those from families with no recourse to public funds

### **Monitoring and accountability**

- Department for Education and local government to put in place mechanisms that hold schools and caterers to account for meeting Schools Food Standards in practice
- Department for Education to be more transparent about the level of nutritional quality that different caterers and schools deliver per pound spent

### **APSE COMMENT**

Although the research was undertaken across 60 schools located in inner London, the findings of the reviewers are consistent with examples reported across the UK. The report highlights that strong leadership and catering staff that are invested in are key elements of achieving nutritious school meals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for children to receive a healthy nutritious school meal and as schools re-opened in September, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families at the Department for Education wrote to schools re-enforcing the importance of a hot meal for children.

The Department of Education have commenced a review of the School Food Standards. However, it is indicated that the revised Standards will continue to lack the monitoring or mechanisms to hold schools and caterers to account.

APSE is concerned that with reducing budgets, the fragmented provider landscape, and no mechanisms to enforce the School Food Standards, the overriding factor in a tendering process becomes cost.

APSE would like to highlight the key role that local authorities have played throughout the pandemic in supporting schools, providing meals for children attending schools during the

lockdown, preparing and distributing food parcel and general being at the forefront of the local authority's pandemic response.

On a final point, the APSE Catering Advisory Group and the submissions to the APSE Service Awards highlight many case study examples of Local Authority Catering services that are not only providing nutritious school meals to children but investing in staff through pay, conditions and training and providing wider support to the local community, such as:-

- Providing food parcels and support hubs during the COVID 19 pandemic.
- Committing to procuring produce locally and supporting local suppliers where possible
- Facilitating cookery classes for children and their parents
- Providing provision for children in the school holidays

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